Joseph Alsop Post 7-26-71

A Choice for Kennedy

THE leading polls, the leading newspapers, the leading politicians, have lately begun saying much the same thing about Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts. In very crude summary, they have been saying that if all the other Democrats cut one another to bits, Kennedy may well be the party's best compromise nominee.

In the main, this is based on the sensible view that except among the instinctive Kennedy-haters in the electorate, the memory of the tragedy at Chappaquidick is fading from men's minds. So it should, indeed. But there is another problem for Senator Kennedy.

If President Kennedy was a normal American, in fact, the liberal democrats have long ceased to be normal. Almost every tenet of President Kennedy's inaugural address has now been viciously denounced by the self-proclaimed liberals in the Democratic Party. Yet these are the people in his party that Senator Kennedy has been fairly lavishly catering to.

The situation is immensely complicated in two different ways.

To begin with, American liberalism's entire remaining intellectual content appears to be the double slogan, "lose in Vietnam, and disarm the U.S." Hence some very odd bellwethers have begun to have much power in the flock. Two of the more conspicuous bellwethers, "The New York Review" and the English "New Statesman and Nation," have lately taken to calling President Kennedy the same names they have long called President Johnson.

The other complication is what may be called free form declassification of government documents. If the documents of the Kennedy administration were handled the way the stolen Vietnam documents have been handled, the impact among the Democratic liberals would be genuinely sensational.

To give only one instance, there was a body known as the Counter Insurgency Committee. In this committee, the late Senator Robert Kennedy was the real moving spirit, while Governor Averell Harriman was the official chairman.

THE Counter Insurgency Committee did two things, in essence. It organized the machinery in the U.S. government which made it possible for the bewildered Bolivians to puncture that gasbag-guerrilla, Che Guevara. There was nothing to Guevara except his ego, and of course his ailments. He had none of the peasant support the U.S. press credited him with. But the fact remains that Robert Kennedy mainly forged the weapon that struck him down.

Second, the Counter Insurgency Committee presided over all sorts of operations, against Fidel Castro's Cuba, for example. That might look very strange on the public record of today. They did not accomplish very much. But they were more serious, as operations, than the little pinpricks known as the "Thirty-Four A" operations that are now supposed to excuse the North Vietnamese attack on the destroyer Maddox.

In the record of President Kennedy's administration, there are a good many other things of the same sort that could come out. If free form declassification is now to be generally practiced, furthermore, there is no reason for President Nixon not to follow the rule about sauce for the goose being sauce for the gander.

Senator Kennedy, of course, is well aware of all this. The lingering influence of the views of his brother, the President, led him to issue a moving but now forgotten endorsement of the U.S. effort in Vietnam, after his first trip there following the American intervention.

With all his ability, with all his courage, with all his many other high qualities, Senator Kennedy further owes an obvious debt to his inheritance. President Kennedy, particularly, was the true founder of the Kennedy greatness.

So where is Senator Kennedy going to be, if he finally has to choose between repudiation of his present admirers, or repudiation of his brother, the president, and indeed of Senator Robert Kennedy when the latter was serving under President Kennedy?

Repudiating his brothers, or repudiating his partisans, will surely be the senator's choice if he is a candidate. It has been disheartening, to put it mildly, to watch the Democratic liberals' failure to rally to President Kennedy's closets subordinate, former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara.

Governor Averell Harriman, almost alone in this special group of Democrats, has behaved like an honorable man in that respect. But for Senator Kennedy, if he is a candidate, the question of honor will be far more painful.

© 1971, Los Angeles Times